

## **Attitude in Youth Sports: Parents Set the Tone** ("Hey, Mom & Dad, Your Attitude is Showing!")

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Attitude is defined as "a person's behavior, which indicates his/her thoughts, feelings, or opinions." In youth sports, you can tell kids' attitudes by watching their behaviors during practice or a game. If they see the game as a game, with an opportunity to learn skills, compete, increase confidence, and have fun, they're able to go with the flow, have fun, and relax. Overall, they show a sense of humor and a sense of good sportsmanship. They're able to learn from their mistakes. However, if they see the game as a pressure-filled event, with winning as the only acceptable outcome, most of their energies will be spent trying not to make mistakes. If they make mistakes (which is inevitable in youth sports), they'll use lots of energy making excuses, blaming others, complaining about officials, etc.

How do kids develop their attitudes? As the saying goes, "The acorn doesn't fall far from the tree." As parents, we have to be aware that our behaviors often set the tone for our kids' attitudes toward youth sports. As adults, we often tend to focus on the "end product", rather than the "process". When an adult arrives at game's end, and sees the kids coming off the field, what is the first word out of his/her mouth? It's usually, "Who won?" or "Did you score any goals (get any hits, etc)?" With our emphasis on the end product, we run the risk of teaching our kids to focus on outcome rather than process (skill improvement). Mistakes are no longer viewed as opportunities to learn. They are seen as occasions of failure.

Research has shown that elite athletes focus on tasks, not trophies. That is, they focus on the process of their skill development, measuring their progress in terms of frequency, duration, or intensity. They have an intense desire to win, but most of their energy is spent competing against themselves. Success in their eyes is measured by progress, not trophy size.

As parents, if we're looking to develop a positive attitude in our kids, we would do well to watch our own behaviors at athletic events. Do we give positive encouragement, or critical judgmental remarks? Do we show a calm demeanor, or heated overreactions to mistakes? Do we praise participation, or game statistics? Next time you go to a game, remember, your attitude is showing, and your kids are watching.